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## Borgo of the Holy Ghost

Stephen Mcleod

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Poetry  
Award  
Series  
*May Swenson*

# The Borgo of the Holy Ghost

*poems by*  
***Stephen McLeod***

foreword by  
Richard Howard

THE BORGO OF  
THE HOLY GHOST



May Swenson  
Poetry Award Series

THE BORGO  
OF THE  
HOLY GHOST

*poems*  
*by*

Stephen McLeod

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*Agni*: "Broken Gull"

*American Poetry Review*: "What Comes Through Hearing"

*Barrow Street*: "All Roads Lead to Kansas"; "Donation"; "The Shoulder Where It Belongs"; "That Crazy Moon"

*Bay Window*: "Just the Facts"

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*Western Humanities Review*: "Against Stevens"; "An Exercise For Lovers"; "For Barbara & Vincent"; "Heaven Reassigned"; "Speaking in Tongues"; "What to Do What to Say".

Some of the poems in this book are dedicated as follows:

"Donation" is for Peter Covino

"The Borgo of the Holy Ghost" is for Joe McLafferty

"Creation" is for Michael Cuomo

"Just By Deciding It" is to the memory of Brent Pierce

"All Roads Lead to Kansas" is to the memory of Dean Yates

"What to Do What to Say" is for Richard Smith, Jr.

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*for José Joaquín Zuleta Colón*





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## FOREWORD

A Note on Stephen McLeod's

*The Borgo of the Holy Ghost*

SO ASSURED IS THE UTTERANCE HERE, SO CONVINCED THE DICTION AND so swift the procession of tropes, that I suspect the most availing strategy for a new reader (it would be a literalism to call Mr. McLeod a “new” poet, for he incessantly reverts to practiced stanzas, sonnets and sestinas, a litany of old contraptions and even older disciplines, of which more presently)—for a *new reader*, then, beset by so many discoveries all at once, so rich a designation of wonders, best to adopt this drastic approach: *in the destructive element immerse*, that is, read right through all the poems as if they were one apostolic statement, a continuous and continuously deprecated handling of what can never be grasped, only beheld. As his ironic title reminds us, this poet's burden is transfiguration—ever aspired to, evidently withheld, eventually bestowed...

*Then*, after such commitment to the whole body of McLeod's poetry, it will be easy—it will be easier—to “figure out” (surely the right formulation here) the individual limbs and organs, separate citations of loss and recovery—“loss” being a name for the life lived, “recovery” for the poems achieved. On those rare and remarkable occasions such as this one when the poet we newly come to is all of a piece (though such a piece be given in fragments, in erasures, in dilapidation and collapse), it is all too common to be flummoxed by the singularities of performance, by the separate (and, say, unpunctuated) address:

Every human wants to say something always to each thing in the road  
Before it is a road or the tire tracks that are not specifically sayings but  
The witnesses of the sayings that even the grocer's daughter keeps  
As lazy and natural as a dollop saying each day like a baby each thing  
Rare and secretly awful the ordinary sayings the things changed  
By being said into the one saying them the one creating them  
Separating them into the things they are and will be and new things...

And besides McLeod's individual poems, each with what I might call its chaotic cosmos to confront, there are all those overriding allusions to the great dead, the Makers (for all his range of afflatus, McLeod is a

worldly poet—he believes other people exist), chosen painters and sculptors so rhapsodically evoked—how did Rothko, Rodin, Joan Mitchell and Pollock gain their apotheosis, along with heroic monsters such as John Brown and Nietzsche, the horns and hoofs of historical record? If we new readers are to assimilate so much hardware, we had better do it by moving right along, reading with the momentum of persistence, at least for the first time around.

“Around” it is, or will be: the poet’s method, his practice, his *usage* is one of inveterate recurrence: first movement or thesis, aspiration to a perfected experience of being; second movement or antithesis, failure, the inevitable collapse of such hopes, what Hegel calls the scandal of the negative; third movement, the synthesis, which is, in religious terms, sacrifice (making-holy). I spoke earlier of the older disciplines which are McLeod’s unfailing resource. Readers will recognize the ancient ceremonies of initiation which are at the root of all poetry, the myth or mouth of sacred utterance. Once the *askesis*, the stripping-away has occurred, the helpless acknowledgement of dearth and deficiency, then (only then) transfiguration may be reckoned and the words of rapture granted:

Our bodies embark their seasons steady as weather.  
Crosswinds meet on the ridges and crowd the air.  
The sky is a glass of water. We are that good.

I am proud to salute Stephen McLeod as the fifth recipient of the May Swenson Poetry Award. He is a new poet after all, and a noble one, chastened by the time’s disinheritance yet by his own numinous utterance a master of our shared experience as fallen men and women.

Richard Howard

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A poet and translator, Richard Howard is Professor of Practice in the School of the Arts (Writing Division) at Columbia University in New York City.

THE BORGO OF THE  
HOLY GHOST



ONE





## DONATION

I would make some small thing for you to hold in your hand.  
It would be black, smooth, blue in the right light.

I would give this object to you secretly, slip it in your pocket.  
You wouldn't notice its soft weight as it slid past the hip,

As it found its right place. I can still hear you  
Waking me: it was a long drive, gone so long

I've forgotten who you are till you say my name,  
Till I hear my name, sit up straight and think that you're Jesus.

What I would give you is the stone that fits the stone-hole perfectly,  
Its contours conforming so clean that you would not notice, for a time,  
That you never walked so balanced and tall, you never saw a street so rare,  
Your own name a bell unbending the stooped man to his full solemnity.

A solid word I would give you to stop up the wind that pulls us all  
Into itself till we are nothing but density. This would prevent you,

In all your days, from the frost at the window, from the narrow lake,  
That then you would not be afraid as your body goes its long way over.

## BECOMING KANSAS

My friend says *yes* to this, *yes* to that,  
Lies in bed all day saying answers,  
His life reduced each hour to this: water,  
Paper-thin sheath of flesh, various cancers  
That he allows, even befriends.  
Some of us will die of greedier  
Diseases, some by our own skeletal hands.  
Others will flicker out; a few will rage.  
My friend looks through his window to land  
Draped over itself in green velvet bulges:  
Rippling fields, uninterrupted ocean  
From eye to horizon that pulses  
With deepening shadow. He used to run  
In those fields. The corn was shoulder high.  
Awaiting blindness, he says *yes* again.  
With body inside-out the door's his eye:  
Turning to everything, everything enters him.  
So I infect him when he looks at me.  
All night he coughs up blood and phlegm.  
The lungs want air, not scenery. Next day,  
He sits up in bed and chooses hymns  
For his funeral. If he can stay  
Still like this, his body's broken gates  
Unhinged, allowing everything to be  
Inside him, saying *yes* to anything that wants  
A body to consume, he thinks  
He can become whatever he loves.  
That is why he does not break,  
And why the ceaseless answers, always the same.  
And even though tomorrow he will wake

and cough half an hour, expelling his dreams,  
    He'll start again, and in fourteen days  
He will finish this task. In death, the seam  
    Of his body quietly separates,  
The word his mouth surrounds now spoken best:  
    Eternal, without pitch or beat,  
The true music intended when I say *yes*.  
    He sings this where we buried him as he  
Lets in the winter through his melting breast,  
    And Kansas, which he will become, and me.

## THAT CRAZY MOON

I can't get enough of the moon. It's all over the place.  
First it's there lounging above that warehouse  
On Christopher Street, the one near the piers  
Where everybody does absolutely  
Everything. You can be sure of that.  
Next day it's coy behind a blue tree,  
Blue as ice in an ice commercial, tipped like a hat,  
Thin as a grandmother's teacup of tears.

And of course it's the easiest love. Poems are lousy  
With it. A man walked there, Sea of Tranquility,  
It enthalls even more, the moon in June, our first blind date.  
I went out once on a blind date that lasted, like a cotton rose.  
There it was, big as a cow, orange, drowsy,  
Wedged above one of those  
Unimaginably expensive townhouses  
Where some elderly diva I imagine

Relives every day of her life backwards. Dreams!  
It rises for me still whenever I wait for it,  
Glad as a fungo with nowhere to fall.  
I watch on 10<sup>th</sup> Street an Attic portico  
For some sign that not only can a blind date  
Turn out for the best, hand in hand, nowhere to go,  
Just schmoozing through the moonlit Mews,  
The beginning of an entire lifetime, unexplainable,

But also that we stand amazingly upright,  
Opposable thumbs, chiaroscuro blue,  
Athena from a shellfish, poetry,  
That the sky cherishes us, an enormous Other,  
Not like anyone's Father, not quite like a mother.  
It is morning now. It is twilight soon.  
And there she is, and everything is true.  
That's the moon for you. That crazy moon.

ANDANTE CON MOTO

1.

This stands for what I cannot say,  
the stone I cut, the chaff I sweep away,  
the quotidian  
task of bodies shedding the ore  
to their natural center and last door,  
as far from the mind  
as future, as a child's too trusting reach.  
This is my only job, to cut and search.  
You lean in that same  
doorway as though you could know from  
tapped sounds the distance they travel to come  
to you, to arrive.  
If I *could* say this I would say:  
You are ever an absence to me, a  
music with no text,  
a vocalise suspended in  
a haze so gray I almost miss it when  
it swells into tongues.  
This leaves me breathless. But it leaves  
me nonetheless. Make no mistake: I love  
language and its works.  
But I would change to hold *you* in my mouth  
for the length of a lozenge. This is the truth.  
This is the whole truth.

2.

At *Hotel Oceana*, Garcia the Dog,  
his mouth full of April flowers,  
is leaping and leaping.

From the balcony his lover,  
impatient, stares at the sea. He never  
notices the street.

He believes this is a sign of  
character, believes that in this way love  
will discover him.

But character is Tosca as  
her hand drops the knife, as she remembers  
to outline the cross

on the forehead of a dead man  
she killed just to see you once more, one  
dawn before the birds.

She knew it would end like this. She  
needed it to end like this, having given  
herself so fully

to Art. Her back lifts the breast and  
places exactly in reach and at hand  
one breath at the world's

last ridiculous parapet,  
inevitable clash: *O Scarpia*,  
*avanti a Dio!*

3.

I've wasted a good deal of my  
life trying to tell you they are not lies;  
they are not dreams; there

*are* ways of ending that do not require  
perfection, only balm. To be here  
is to do something

flawlessly. I refuse to dream  
because no matter how bad it gets some-  
one loves me; this is

clear from the cellos that tell the  
secrets of every created thing.

I believe in this:

what is not here fashions me, proof  
of our bodies, the glow of going loose.

I am coming out-

doors now to walk in the snow, to  
disturb it. I will walk such a long way  
at last to become

unremarkable. This is how it ends,  
no augmented thunderclap, only this:  
two skies connected,

the charged space between them, how to  
listen, what to say when the roan mane spoons  
your splendid shoulder,

and the music relaxes to  
staggered rows, and the right words gather in  
short, still sentences.

## THE SHOULDER WHERE IT BELONGS

*Why am I so determined to put the shoulder where it belongs? Women have very round shoulders that push forward slightly; this touches me and I say: "One must not hide that!" Then someone tells you: "The shoulder is on the back." I've never seen women with shoulders on their backs.*

Coco Chanel

A torch song *slightly touches me*

but I try to ignore it because

I am working before working

but what can I do    The radio has

*very round shoulders that push    forward slightly*

I'm thinking about

my mother's pearls in a high school picture

you know it's not real it couldn't be

but    *Don't Explain*    she was always

*determined even then*

*to put the shoulder where it belongs*

last week I took to the streets where it is whispered

the Rasputin of Peru has men on every corner

*they put your head in one place and your feet in another*

and no one will miss you    that is his secret

exquisitely the women wear their    *shoulders on their backs*

and they do not wake from these rendezvous

he is that clever

O to be a victim

gliding Fifth Avenue deviant aloof

heads turning    whispering    nodding

in that knowing way

I confirm

your deepest fears    one day you will wake up

your shoulder where it doesn't belong

and I will be there next to you watching

as the rose light exposes your shadows    your shoulders fabulous  
and backwards



## OF BEING AND ESSENCE

Every human wants to say something always to each thing in the road  
Before it is a road or the tire tracks that are not specifically sayings but  
The witnesses of the sayings that even the grocer's daughter keeps  
As lazy and natural as a dollop saying each day like a baby each thing  
Rare and secretly awful the ordinary sayings the things changed  
By being said into the one saying them the one creating them  
Separating them into the things they are and will be and new things  
How sometimes it is misty and the streets seem dangerous  
But the danger is quiet or perhaps it is smothered there in neutral colors  
Taking on ordinary sounds in the background no one actually listening  
A small error in the beginning is a war in the middle and silence  
And then no one is saying anything but staying still and amazed  
As she has her adventures and goes along the road on her safety tires  
Daydreaming or thinking about the kids how beautiful and odd  
But she cannot exactly know that she is thinking this it is too  
Beautiful and queer and exposed and wet and creaking in the sharp air  
What she says is in her hands you can see the blue veins on the topside  
On the other side you can see the white imprints of the stillborn words  
The glossalalia of what she will be yet on a Sunday maybe  
When the snow is still full and holy in the strange light

## THE EXECUTION

*What were you doing the day it happened?*

*How did you learn of it?*

*What did you do then?*

Augustine

That day you were playing in the dirt. You rolled  
Dirt cigarettes in newspaper. Hot or cold,  
You never noticed. You learned of it slowly,  
The way bugs slow down

In the light or winter, the way a voice goes  
South. So many days have become only *then*  
Or *ago* or *when I was a kid*; details  
Lurk in blurred borders.

You want to break out. Always, in everything,  
To step back into your shadow till the birds  
Can see through you and the heat doesn't enter  
And nothing matters.

What did you do then? You started to die too.  
You began without knowing. But dying, the  
Participle, has no clear beginning till  
The moment it's said,

And already it's over, the one pure thing  
The one did who did it, who was doing it  
Without knowing, perfectly. Someone exhales  
And then it's finished,

As though a whole life of anticipated  
Joy is one breath, one glimpse at the new light just  
Clearing the horizon as the axe falls clean,  
Swift, with the careless

Surprise of that day you heard it whisper from  
The periwinkles in your grandmother's dark beds,  
In a flock of boys, and you kept quiet, and  
You knew it was true.

## LOGO

When the last word is  
spoken it will be  
gasoline the left-  
over groceries  
roll idly nowhere  
stop now forever  
  
there within the light  
of trees light shuts down  
a city's ruined  
vast canyons over  
the red sky a last  
banner fading some-  
  
one's voice echoing  
O the ripe days gone  
the fiorellos  
scattered like useless  
money and no song  
lingers no dust sounds

THE BORGO OF THE HOLY GHOST  
(Rome: Christmas night, 1991)

The earthly city affords its shrug-of-shoulder luster  
simply by being there.

Not avarice or lust or even pride preserved it.

I set my course toward

The simplest, pinkest light. And if I find myself  
in love, for example, or caught

By the slightly unsettling glare of someone's constant attention,  
it isn't the point of life.

At the end of the tunnel to our right, a waist-high marble plaque  
reports, by a straightish line

Engraved below the Latin, its cursive script difficult,  
the level the Tiber crested

In 1274. Above, a shrine of more  
recent vintage: an overturned

Glass of flowers singed by a votive light recently spent,  
itself knocked over.

The better guidebooks will miss, while noting the genre,  
such windows as these.

That same year (we could be told) Aquinas collapsed and found  
the long-awaited answer

To questions never asked at Lateran IV, where he  
forfeited his seat to Another.

And seven centuries later you are born while somewhere  
another flood threatens.

Remarking a disaster or even a rendezvous  
with battered almanacs

Can signify the sense that some things are important,  
especially when they're cut

In the best Italian marble. But everyone has a birthday,  
and this, at least, implies

That someone loves you enough to tell you what it is.  
We get by on our looks in the end,

By what we've weathered or by what we've allowed.  
I can't think of anything better  
To hope for than the plowed and planted meadow where  
I've cast my seed with yours  
And waited for a generous summer. And so I am led to you  
by ancient lanes and tunnels,  
Routes long established for someone else's shortcuts,  
prayers and landmarks.  
This plaque is not conceivably near today's *Lungotevere*. Still,  
I suppose it's the same river.  
And as we emerge, my heart, unhinged, releases its rudder:  
Before me, unexpected,  
Lit by cool fluorescence, the Pantheon appears like the Host  
Raised in a seamless monstrosity.  
Christmas night. The edge of a suddenly antique sky  
spills over, accommodating  
The pillowy glow that rises from discreetly placed lighting.  
I touch with my whole hand  
A large, bewildering column, pocked as the moon, and solid.  
I listen for the sound  
Humming beneath my fingers of two thousand years.  
I have never touched anything  
So unmistakable. Nothing stranger. *I forgot to tell you about this,*  
you say, inscrutable, smiling.

## EASTER IN BELGRADE, 1999

Here the gathered hush  
Joins the light dimly.  
The only sound's the risk  
Of sound before the sound  
No one can hear until  
Its echo crashes grimly  
Into the battered fragments  
Of explanation. Ground  
Sustains it, though heavens trill  
In developing segments.  
And now the world is brisk  
With nothing, and lush  
With the unspeakable.  
In lunar cities the halls  
Are dark and shocked with noise  
As brutal histories  
Combine to wedge the age  
To its millennial  
Appointment. Sadly, the strains  
Of Bruckner in the breeze  
Prove illusory. Rumors  
Of another monster's passage  
Exaggerate even as the walls  
Of Belgrade crack and stumble.  
Exiled beauty seethes  
From music to pronouncement.  
Hawks cry from the cathedral  
Where a bishop sourly swings  
His Easter thurible.  
A missile from heaven breathes  
Its wondrous alleluia,  
And Christendom, chest-high,  
Repeats its yearly, inscrutable  
But no less urgent announcement:  
*The Lord is risen indeed!*  
The blood of Abel sings.

A.D.

Newborn and starved for news, Theophilus  
Receives the heft of Acts from the climate-cracked  
South. The glad sun seems to wax.

Elitist

But otherwise accurate Tacitus  
Remarks, almost in passing,  
The light's odd surge of brilliant noonday glamor  
As, after the fire, while porcine Nero naps,  
His scapegoats one by one collapse  
In the garlanded arena. He sighs and hopes for the best.

Amidst all this unsightly clamor  
Few seem to notice, as the old world flowers  
Each springtime to its last,  
That once unrivaled gods capitulate,  
And gleaming towns are crushed beneath their weight,  
And once again the days have left their hours  
To gather at the edge of the faltering age  
Wedging in V-formation toward its throat.

And fewer still will see  
A light green carpet on the pale slopes grassing  
The empire under, or the crowds that lie  
Like hordes fast-frozen by some trick or art,  
Who feed each other there by hand, by heart,  
And spread to a glowing blur on the horizon.

## AT JOHN BROWN'S GRAVE

I am feeling so empty this May after three years the same thing;  
I need to go up, see the sights, take in a little of the last  
Cold air before Life. So I come here. It isn't hard to find,  
Just off the highway at one of those towns whose sole reason  
For existence is a famous shack, a grave, a barn  
And the tallest mountain in New York state.

I don't know, maybe I have a nervous condition, but I stand at  
The fence getting sunburned and I'm thinking, *why?* A woman  
Who lives just off the federal parking lot or whatever it is seems  
So excited to see us like a happy Labrador. I watch her  
Running from a hundred yards away, clutching her floppy ranger  
Hat, slowing down to a trot, fanning herself—*Whoeee!* she complains,

Cheerfully, cautiously. Who are these two, she wonders.  
The thought passes; she's just so excited to give us the grand tour.  
There are four or five buried, a son or two, a comrade, someone  
Else I think. Just a bunch of nuts if you want to know. What's strange  
Is that everyone *does* know this, the night in '57 he dragged men and  
boys from

Their beds and quietly split their skulls. Osawatomic John.

And there's a boulder like the one at Pollock's grave, who, incidentally, was  
Recently featured on a postage stamp without a cigarette—there was much  
Debate about the cigarette. And standing there I couldn't help thinking  
about Pollock,

The last person who should have occurred to me, except he too  
Was possessed, driven, but that's pretty obvious so I stop thinking about  
Pollock's brain sprays and his little barn outback, also preserved, and I

Remember that my friend and I drove hundreds of miles upstate  
To lay eyes on this rough place and, of course, the famous  
Mountain. It says something about me, I think, and about America  
That this is an official place. That the tiny house he built, the failed  
Farm, the stone-yard there, is watched over by the government  
And a fan club. What kind of hero is this? What kind of father?



I think it was Strong who wrote, *He only told us what time it was*.  
But I'm not sure. I scoured the diaries unsuccessfully one week in  
April trying to find this, so maybe it was Douglass. Anyway,  
I suppose that it's true, though it should be argued we didn't need *him*  
To tell us that. He must have told something though. All those kids  
And wives crammed into this three-room shack. All ready to die

For men they never knew or loved except in some abstract, harsh  
Old Testament way. But when I think about everything I've read  
To prepare myself, and even before, it seems this haunting  
That spread like infection to stragglers and sons is what I am. Essentially.  
Daguerreotypes show his character well enough: the crazy  
Eyes, the hand held high taking his bloody vow. The very image of

The Prophet. And yet what did he prophesy? Ask the ghosts at  
Potawatomí. Ask Bleeding Kansas. Ask *him* for that matter.  
He failed at everything he did including his famous stand at Harpers Ferry,  
And America builds him a boulder, encloses his tombstone in dingy glass,  
And pays a guard to live there in the shadow of the Mountain,  
Just to sit by a window, waiting for someone to show.

This is the same nation that denied Pollock a cigarette. I don't know anything.  
In spite of all I pray today, for myself, for *the Republic for which he stood*.  
I leave here puzzled, a couple of brochures thrown into the backseat,  
Mosquito bitten, sunburnt. Still, that white-faced mountain is a mystical sight.  
One night two boys slipped out. They spent the night on its cold slope.  
As far as I know it was their one free night. They are buried here too.

## DIVA

We sought a finer sound that could lift up  
Bathetic faces from their drowsy tiers,  
A voice to reconstruct the standard plot  
Into an altar high and lit in the figured air.

(It was, of course, the air we loved, the air  
Tilting half-way between the universe  
And our snug shod feet, tense as though to spring.)  
We found it in the echoes of a life

Lived somewhere else than ours. A heroine  
We'd overlooked. A tragedy made supple  
By air reborn into our own mad scenes.  
We couldn't help but hear, in her tortured breath,

As Violetta dying separates  
The syllables of joy, that what we'd lost  
Was well worth losing. And the house,  
Gone dark after the last punishing blows,

Was silent for—what?—a moment?  
We listened as we listen now: to nothing—  
The voice we sought was nothing in the air.  
She died of singing and of silence. Now,

Her coffin passes by to wild applause,  
That still can cry out what we cannot sing:  
We are an ugly race, abandoned, glorious.  
We take this more seriously than we can say.

## THE BROKEN GULL

First, disregard the shattered plume, the edge  
Of fence unwinding where the carcass lies,  
The feathers darkly plastered, stiff, at odd,  
Unpleasant angles splaying from the bones.  
Ignore all but the pearly eye transfixed  
In blank perception of the unfurled flame.

It is as if some other world, aflame  
With useless muscle touches us, edge on edge,  
And, purple-gray, its signature has fixed  
Itself upon this beach where we wanted to lie  
And feel the sunlight loosening our bones  
Into the texture of sand. It seems odd,

We never plan to be undone by odds  
So entirely weighed against us, as if flame  
Could not burn, and marrow in the bones  
Not gradually thin till, standing on an edge,  
Hollow and squinting, we see the cards that lie  
Face up, and realize the game was fixed.

Or when a landscape seems fixed  
So that the intrusion of some odd  
Detail washing ashore to lie  
In front of us is like a house in flames  
On an otherwise peaceful block, we age  
A little in the heart and in the bones.

And what seemed, once, more than clattering bones,  
A sense of ourselves in which the soul was fixed,  
Fades visibly with some offhand remark, the edge  
Of which can cut us to the core at odd,  
Unpleasant angles; whatever tiny, tended flame  
Aroused us to this beach has flickered; we lie

Somewhat further apart than how we'd lie  
As children with children's springing bones,  
Our minds unfluttered like a holy flame  
On which we'd dote with wonder, fearless, transfixed,  
Never completely perceiving our odd  
And precarious perch: toes just over the edge.  
Now, consider your own bones eaten by time's flame.  
Think of them as odd the way they lie  
At the edge of your life: not quite broken, not fixed.

TWO



## OBSESSIVE

Mozart made me want to play  
Piano, made it sound easy.  
Like painting. And speaking out loud  
In a theater. A hundred things.

And you see, I have done these things.  
Because they were. Easy.  
But nothing is easy.  
I *have* done one thing.

Another. Then another. None of them easy.  
And soon I turn butterfly,  
Indigo tenor warming up with scales;  
The lips of His breath make the tiniest  
Kissing sounds, echoes in the cupola:  
Wingbeats. Transformation. It isn't easy.

Some days, today for example, waking's  
A struggle: skating sleep's watery turns,  
Not ready to trade the dream,  
Confused as it thins into light.

Is this the same funereal light,  
The same dream-pigeons in their turns:  
Devastating—roof to sill to roof to sill?  
Eventually, one gives up the dream.

And thankfully. *It was only a dream.*  
Folds it up and closes the drawer.  
This isn't beginning again, awakening.

The pigeon starts when I exhale  
The dream. Have I loved more than loving  
You? Have I done anything harder?

## LIMELIGHT

*I am not what I am.* I am radiant.  
Tonight I hide what's human in a drug.  
I can't see what I'll kiss. I'm groping for  
An armor wrap, a stranger's slung embrace.  
And if, in the dark, I cannot see his face,  
He's this week's trifle, skinny would-be thug,  
My version of *amo, amat, amor*.  
Or bridge-and-tunnel guppy, golden flame,  
Who's swimming 'round the bowl, not noticing  
That every turn around his life's the same.  
Continually and chemically amused  
We float through crowds, identities confused,  
Hovering above ourselves, what angels want:  
Held down by who we sing, by whom we're sung.



MISMALOYA BAY (Mexico: 1977)

Mistakes have made me. I wished them through.  
Still, whispers reach me from the streets below.  
I do not listen. They carry me.  
Friends, but not enough to last, have carried me.

And written in a scrupulous hand, my estate,  
Like a glyphed eye on limestone cliffs  
Describes what I am and could not be  
Without them. I have ruined my life more than once.

Surely the sign at the highway's turn conceals  
A mystery, but what good is it to stop and gawk  
At what an angler left to rib the world?

Arriving where I began, *je doute donc je suis*,  
I cup my hand for potable water;  
The sky's bruised tit releases what it can.

## SPEAKING IN TONGUES

### 1.

He ran in cotton rows at War and Kings,  
Sat in an elbow of an oak and ruled  
The baked expanse, his half-built town, or crawled  
Inside the grass in summer's deepest field.  
He rode each winter Wednesday to the church  
And altar-boyed, imagining the springs  
Where he first knew the water's secret touch,  
Where he first felt his body's flame unfurled.  
He broke his own heart daily as he grew  
Into a man he never planned to be.  
He lost the days in whirlwinds as he threw  
Cash to the bar and called for clarity.  
But when he spoke to you, he'd only stutter.  
And when he dreamed of you, he dreamed of water.

### 2.

In Oklahoma, during your hermit streak,  
Cleaved to a cabined precipice above  
A yawning gap, you played the King of Love  
To outdoor audiences twice a week.  
Magnetic, all vibration, but thin and weak,  
You seemed so ready for the dazzling dove  
To enter you that when you saw me off,  
I thought that if I spoke to you, you'd break.  
Since then I see you everywhere, in crowds,  
In libraries, the laundromat, the stage.  
As Christ, in dreams you reach for me: both hands  
Are cupped and spilling over at their edge  
With white and weightless space to knit my words  
Elastic, shocked, and struggling to the page.

3.

When we were here together, I admit  
I must have seemed to you completely crazy.  
And though that time is still a little hazy,  
I do remember weeping quite a bit.  
For my part you were like a glass of water:  
Whenever I called or stumbled in, you smiled.  
And while I overplayed the wicked child,  
I'm glad you didn't have to watch me shatter.  
Yet what was underneath those everyday,  
Past-midnight calls and visits for a loan  
Was what I never told you, what I fall  
Away from telling now, sober and grown,  
Because I still don't want to hear you say  
That what I wanted wasn't possible.

4.

I'd like to take you home with me and keep  
You like a pet to talk to, to compose  
Sonnets and lullabies about, and sleep  
With you. I want to wake and watch the rose  
Light pine and swell inside of you. I want  
You to think of me first when you wake up.  
I want to climb into your belly and  
Climb out. I want to run and never stop.  
Who are you? Once, on New Year's Eve I thought  
For ten long minutes you were here with me,  
Walking down Mercer Street, up Broadway where  
The drunken horns and floodlights shook the air.  
It actually started snowing. Lover, lately  
That night is all I ever think about.

## MY FATHER'S SON

Today a northeast wind comes pushing down,  
Tightens the cobbles, hardens the corn's dead flower,  
A minute more of light for every hour.

I wish I were a simpler man.

I watch his silhouette haloed with rain  
Caught in streetlight scrim, still a shower  
Between the dark and darker, but it's slower.

His steps crescendo as he closes in.

He never looks. I never call him. He  
Moves past me, but I run with what he's run,

His complicated son.

In the end, he will lie underneath me,  
His counsel quit, his daily waking done.

I wish I were a quiet man.

## BROKEN

Once I ran away into the night ten years  
    There was no harm in the night any hand hot  
At my belt at my shirt buttons I dreamed  
    I sailed above them I was the deft man  
So many years night boundless flexible  
    Striped light through shudders the only hunger  
Bracing the slim space between us I was  
    Another there another wet city  
Pond of yellow light swimming still blistered  
    Wet roads hurricane the windows rattled  
I was awake all night ten years away  
    And sixteen since a quiet jungle  
Once I ran away hard night slow night  
    Whispers me still whispers still whispers

## OUR LADY OF ABUNDANCE

No payoff at first. I swung my arms to dance,  
Not sure how I should feel, if I should sing.  
Late summer night. We *had* been studying.  
He stood and as he moved, as though by chance,

He let his blue cloth robe drop to the floor.  
His cock was only inches from my face.  
I stared at him. Now, I don't remember  
Any feeling. Timelessness? Even less.

The next time we smoked, it hit me. I avoided his hand.  
Later I made him my first *particular* friend.  
By then he had a girlfriend and a car.

The next year brought me booze and another, much  
More passionate, confused, destructive. Such  
A waste. *He* drove headfirst into his last closed door.

FOR BARBARA & VINCENT

*1. Perhaps Our Woes are Inescapable*

What matter that these maple branches decked  
With dapple-fall stand skewered in a tire  
Of styrofoam articulately packed  
Where, sooner than I want, a Christmas tree  
Will twinkle artlessly into the night?

Just this: that I would trade the world's  
Inheritance for their gaudy, utterly blank,  
Unblemished pain. I would unswindle  
Every child and watch her grow. I would  
Prevent her as a mournful light from every  
Shame. Zosima was right. We *are* all  
Guilty. And on behalf of all, I cut  
Three jeweled limbs of loveliness-in-death  
To decorate this corner of our life.

*2. Home Movie*

Four months colder than a hundred miles south,  
In rented rooms, a house George Washington slept in,  
Built, or bypassed, we wasted an afternoon,  
Crowded near a fire, to watch *Hiroshima*  
*Mon Amour* without a soundtrack. Brian  
Kept insisting the film was made that way.  
I slipped away as often as I could  
To steal a shot, straight from the bottle,  
Someone's Christmas gift. I didn't ask  
Permission. Easier to beg forgiveness if you're caught.  
I thought whiskey would make the day more real.  
But, twenty years later, sober fifteen,  
I'm still afraid of hearing what I missed.

### 3. *Insomnia*

Night's fist of darkness loosens as the sun  
    Gives me another puzzle how to sing.  
    It's 7:30 and I haven't slept  
At all this night. Or any night for days.

Virgil wrote Eclogues. I need another form  
    That tells about the sunrise on our towers,  
    Its daily alchemy. Pedestrians  
Do not, as a rule, look up, and so they miss

    Epiphanies: at my window, our family of falcons  
    Secure in their Fifth Avenue zip code,  
Out for a morning soar, hungry angels  
    Caught in a snapshot. None will see  
    As I have seen: hawk shadows on the gold  
As momentary as the light itself.



## AGAINST STEVENS

Truth is I have not sentiments for sleep.  
The common tongue, the way you say we are  
In *your* concupiscence, I thought I had to keep  
The hill in Tennessee stoic, mystic its jar.  
You've bullied me too long for me to call  
You uncle, hero, St. Wallace of Hartford.  
It may take years to clear my ear of all  
The Evenings Without Angels I have heard.  
But give self second thoughts, my doctor said,  
When speech is at its zenith stay inside.  
I take her advice quite seriously, she is  
A true diva in my book. So let this ride  
Its cycle for a while, but not your head  
That makes me whole, your words me wise.

## I SAW THE WORLD END

I dreamed of Schiller's head cascading down  
The capitol; that he proposed this in a song.  
Surrounded by human cattle deceived by slogans,  
They took his word of universal bond  
And sacrifice as one. But it was only warning,  
A song for female voice. This is its text.

*We are all republicans. Prevent us  
O Lord in all our doings, etc.*

I lost my love and turned to brotherhood;  
What difference does it make? The sun supplies  
The songs their hydrogen, the texts their freeze,  
And all is dissipated in the general thaw.  
The epigrams themselves, exposed, are bridged,  
And every word is lit to show its teeth.

## NIETZSCHE AT BAYREUTH: 1876

The summer closes with a cosmic fit,  
But seasons avoid me. Here, I don't exist.  
Some doze off, grimly vested, dimly lit  
By crackling gowns: these husbands on a list:  
Official Friends. Who understands these men?  
Why did they choose this myth, this four-day show  
To nap beside their wives. It's far too slow  
A penance for their sorrow and their spite.

I fool myself that all of us are one  
Standing beneath the final D-flat shine  
That overflows the rafters and the Rhine.  
But all of us are guilty, and the stains  
Rinse equal in the artificial sun  
From these hard chairs above the world's remains.

*DAS LIED VON DER ERDE*

From nowhere caught, the song  
Carves me the way I suppose  
Some fabulous distinction carves—a love  
Returned, a death, or sound itself whose dreams  
Grow solid in their lying down, whose layers  
Fix, like fins, their depths  
And render them maneuverable.

*I cannot*

*Move while she is singing this. Why do we love  
What crushes us?*

Over distance, over trouble,  
The shadowed marshes bend against themselves,  
Bend to a borrowed wind, in time, unmeasured.  
The moon forgets to rise on the Yellow River.  
A sad man mourns dead lovers in his sleep  
With no one left. Forever. No one left.

## BRINDISI

Can't sing a drinking song today and so  
Can't tell his secret prayers on borrowed beads.  
Can't line his empties up in rows as though  
A saint his sins, a hunter his stuffed heads.

Can't lie in darkness weeping for the light.  
Can't turn his friends to surrogates for his  
Fanatic passions as no one in sight  
Seems worth the trouble to seduce or please.

But, scourged and bound by how he's learned to see,  
As in the shine from smoke-scarved rivers: pain,  
He sweats the bloody sweat of poetry,

And writes the poison out but not the stain,  
So that his vocal chords, wanting to burst,  
Can only sing today with Christ: I thirst.

## THE GOLDBERG VARIATIONS

Baled in grave gray, this photo is three-quarters  
Triangle of enormous hair. I believe you when you say you  
Are Beautiful, Generous, Untimely. I believe your  
Litter of Events. You are not their tree.  
The Little Flower, enclosed in habit lived utterly free  
And died a silent girl. You've not had freedom for one hour.  
In the *Goldberg Variations* a pedestrian tune's  
A rich man's lullaby made new:

We are neither bitch divas nor virgin martyrs.  
We are these variations warmed with vigor of an obsolete  
Triangle: composer, interpreter, listener, each with a job to do.  
The theme is entrusted to you (whoever *you* are) as though  
To raise it in your left hand, winsome, white,  
And splinter the world, ordinary, slow.

## CHRONIC

It seemed bed saws' grinding teeth; something churning  
in the sheets, carbide winter ahead, broiling sea at each equator  
where men's bones are oboes now, men like myself who have no name or too  
many to fit one stone. Or simply no one. It was my  
room just off the hall. It was my  
vantage point: I watched my parents tear each other up.

### Light

brazen, invading my dark. It seemed that if I slept someone would go and  
not come back. He did and I was right to be alone. I've loved. But loved alone.  
And what does it matter now, thirty years late? Snapdragons, goldenrod,  
tall tulips opening, autumned limbs arranged with pumpkin kids, gesture paintings,  
too many clothes, too many books; but just the right kaleidoscope. And then,  
there's always someone else to consider, his brain, his  
bearing.

## BLESSING

He talked himself up woke to his own voice  
Full sentences questions strangled into  
Speech now it feels like dawn raking wisp-thin  
Glory in his thrushed tongue he tries to say  
To this day's noisy birds its rattled locks  
The words his dream spoke to the real morning  
That it would congeal to hold him one breath  
He is to be here this day becoming  
Shoulders hung with invisible harness  
Head-wanting-no-thing he mouths the dream grid  
Only scaffolding now only the frame  
A rubbery bluster a new balloon  
Of blood let go now let me into you  
Let day stay behind its blind slat shadows



## FIRST MORNING LIGHT

### *1. Heroin*

Through all the rain that year, summer was  
Out-classed. Not a whisper about global warming.  
Tight-chested, we defied the misty city  
And almost lasted. August took my breath away.  
Now what? Today I thought if God would offer me  
A good disease, a month, painkillers, autumn,  
A final exhalation, all the hymns  
Chosen, the epitaph graven without flourish on  
A simple, slender stone, white Carrera marble,  
I'd take Him up on it. I wanted to cop today  
On Avenue D. Instead, I met a man who needed me.  
His name was James. I gave him ten dollars.  
I told him I could respect someone who had  
Fallen to the ground to see, who loved the bass notes.

### *2. Puerto Vallarta*

Anger is the world's first poem's first word,  
The rage of someone's son who's been shortchanged.  
Sulking on my own, the room too hot,  
I nurse my tit of rum till I'm content.  
I hold the sunset in my hand and squeeze:  
The night escapes from underneath my hat.  
An old song from a city never built  
Surprises this dusty land where they pray to the dead  
For Vengeance, Liberty, the Tourist Trade.  
Tonight, after closing the Piano Bar, Luis  
Drives me out to the Pink Cantina no white man knows.  
Scattered with human flamingos, the middle of nowhere  
He shows me how to breathe beneath the glaze.  
I hold him like a life-raft all night long.

3. *Richard Smith (1944–1996)*

The sky should have been metal-forged, pounded  
Like Job's, a righteous man, with warning—of what?  
But even then, who could have known that storms  
Would be the least of grief? Furious summer.  
I lost somewhere the will to flower then.  
Console me. It will help. Everyone has an opinion.  
I passed along the river to his wake.  
The train stopped long enough to meet the rain.  
No son or wife could understand the reason;  
No girl imagined yet that he was gone.  
An upright man, his family robbed, and given  
The drifting rain, the puzzle of going on.  
I thought there must be going on. I touched  
His powdered hands and prayed he was not there.

4. *Augustus Papaceno (b. 24 May 1996)*

Impulse to breathe, heaving the torso through  
The icy grip of someone else's world,  
Bursting the crisp, sun-dazzled layer of the new  
Stunned flesh you are: Augustus Papaceno.  
How many thousand times you'll break our hearts,  
To translate this into the you we'll know  
(As we've done too, until that day this starts  
Again, when from new wombs we're thrust, uncurled  
And screaming at the air's first hardening).  
I'll tell you a secret, boy: there is no other  
Life. Your father's a gentle man. Your mother  
Will love you like the sunrise loves the spring.  
Risk love. It's worth the grief and bother.  
And be relaxed—but ready for anything.

## AN EXERCISE FOR LOVERS

Think of one of those afternoons before  
A spring storm breaks. Think of the highway,  
Quiet under the clouds as though it wore  
Their bruised shadows like a scarf, a gray  
Canopy of bloom, steel on silver,  
Until the curtain tears, the wind shakes  
And seems to drop, injured, a white blister  
Rips beyond the city to Seven Lakes  
Where we saw the wild swan. We sat on the slate,  
Chilled, shivering. Think of those lakes  
From the city. Think of the lightning there.  
I almost kissed you. But that larger weight  
On the water seemed a warning: the mirror breaks.  
Think of the swan as though it didn't care.

## WHAT TO DO WHAT TO SAY

Don't look at a mirror for several days.  
Reform the hollow just above the tongue  
Below the roof till its occlusion says  
What it will name you then. Inside the lung,  
A breath lies waiting to surround the word  
That breathed before you, beating in the ground.  
Sometimes at night it climbs out like a bird  
And looks at you, and folds its wings around  
Your rising, falling frame. It licks your ears  
And whispers *I've come home. I'm home for you.*  
*That shadow stretched out on the hill is mine.*  
Begin to speak as though you would to one  
You've never seen but heard about for years.  
Say this: It was all true. It was all true.

THREE



## CREATION (Rodin)

Raise this, maestro: tons of ice, truckloads scraping below my window.

Whole bins of hard snow grinding toward the River. I pray

For tight leaves sleeping,

Lime-pale, translucent, not even leaves, ideas of leaves.

Thawed sap stirring; first blood of spring flashing from a New Year's penny,

Raise this *miglior Fabbro*, in your spheric hand: our neighborhood's

Bum muttering sidewalk conspiracies, roaring the

*Internationale*,

Slept through the blizzard. I thought he must be underneath.

But there he is today, Castro and Congo, paper cup trembling.

I'll bet the boy who runs the video store showed him the subway.

*Can't buy him a sandwich. Container of coffee? Sure.*

*Something stronger? Sure.*

*No forbidden fruits, not even a doughnut? No teeth.*

You know Lord how we hate to be patronized. *Just a cigarette.*

Don't wait till the Last Day. Remember Cuba, and Gettysburg and

The visions of all holy fools. The video boy.

What a wondrous face

Too. I imagine your face like that, all business,

But that beautiful. He took offense. It was only a thank you.

He didn't need it from me. The woman who sleeps near Calvary,

The thrift shop man's Caribbean vowels, copper, sunburnt,

*(Imagine: sunburnt!)*

Help her back to us. Does she know her name? No matter.

We are all of us raised toward evening, toward the giant snow.

We watch the moon's sickle, lazy eyelid, dimmed by the Opera,

By streetlights, cars. We adorn ourselves, give your light back.

We hang, your pendant,

Blue globe, steaming amulet, Paradise of Desire

Lifted to the oyster light, your jewel at night's deep-shadowed throat.

*ICI* (Joan Mitchell)

The plane is on the floor.  
The plane is empty, numberless.  
The plane has teeth. It is

Here, a longing with walls,  
Accessory before the fact,  
Revealer, destination.

The woman above the plane is  
Irrelevant. She is  
Empty, numberless,

A tunnel of revelation.  
What will she do? Between  
The woman and the plane is  
Void and Without Form. It  
Hovers for something to happen.  
Something happens.



## APOLOGY (Willem de Kooning)

I like painting big women  
I am secure painting large women most men  
Will not say this power will not name this girth  
Men want each other Earth  
Is a big woman sunrise  
A big woman on the sea  
Flaunting revealing embracing me  
I wish you would sit for me my fortissima my prize  
  
The man breathes as he paints her she is truth  
Light catches her a memory of birth  
Strikes off the sea knits the composition  
Her bosom is full this is not a problem  
If he could say what he feels he might call it youth  
Held up by light held down by earth

## GRAY AND GREEN (Mark Rothko)

Out of nowhere into nowhere nothing spreads,  
Or lies, or floats, intensest at no point  
Particular but this, divided by  
Tall screens and carved and housed  
For wandering outside the rectangle

To what its walls cannot enclose.  
Or how the mind can go entirely dark  
So that the hand can see, so that the dark  
Can breathe, so that the light can never hide,  
Being swallowed up, being rescued.

One wants a candle to the gray, the green,  
A slender flame elegant as an elbow,  
Or smoke to lift its call, or only air,  
Or only knowledge that is knowledge of  
Nothing that is here,

Pearl of great price, and small, and still,  
And always wakeful, watching for the night.  
The man whose crooked fingers saw the light  
And hid it here, and covered it, and bled  
Himself completely out, not rescued, not

Appraised, over and over, and larger still,  
And here, the brightest number of his sight  
Is zero housed in black and white  
A room without him, always without him,  
Always away.

## AUTUMN RHYTHM

*I deny the accident. . . . The result is the thing.*

Jackson Pollock

I found you everywhere where I was not  
haze of stars    jazz bramble  
buried lakes  
a perfect undistinguished thing  
the accident  
slain at the foundation of the world

I called you from antiquity  
sacrifice  
the great whales surfaced to horn the air's first music  
you woke in their waiting  
each thing assembled  
there was not one missing

I honed you in the frigid shack  
stained and reeling    humid flame  
till the glad dance rained    the lung erupted  
each riff a rose in a lasso of black

I traced your lattices and violet heights  
the dark claimed the water  
the dark claimed the light

you are the word I could not say  
the syncopated stop  
the halt  
the outstretched arm

it is autumn now  
dark as a penny  
as woodsmoke  
paper leaves  
as now in the crisp wind

I vanish entirely  
a boulder of absence in the tangled air

*PIETA* (Michelangelo)

At first it may not seem so, but the form  
Inflates. And in particular, her hands:  
The one we see that's opening extends  
Above the knee; the other, under his arm,  
Supports the lifeless mass where once he dwelt  
Among us. He is surprisingly small  
On her enormous lap, as though when all  
That burden drained into the world, he knelt  
And crumpled there, a rag, a broken wing.  
And she, because she understands, because  
She understood that spilling out and was,  
From the beginning, opened, opening,  
Receives and swells, becomes again the ark  
Of all that light and pain. She does not weep.  
She stares at him as though he were asleep  
And bares him like a lamp against the dark.

ANNUNCIATION (Fra Angelico, Cell 3,  
Convent of San Marco, Florence)

She watches the attitudes of water  
    the hunter's dive  
    the eye of the prey in burdened dark  
she waits for the eye to comprehend  
    but comprehension does not come until  
    that moment when the sky  
    abruptly shows the water's trick  
the motors move that move all motors here  
    necessity's a broken limb still green in the rain  
    its cry was never heard until she turned  
to watch the water and the water's glare  
    a tear in space where light and dark commune  
    a personal place for which there is no word  
    because no one would notice so caught up  
strangely she notices strangely  
    she is not surprised  
    that light and water speak to her and say  
*you might have come here at any time*  
    *there is no time*  
        *you sit at the edge of earth*  
        *to see the moment sparked by nothing more*  
        *than the insisting thrust of every moment's birth*  
*how can the child have learned the crime*  
    *but by believing the silent ghost behind the door*  
        *a rush of wind in the dark*  
        *a moment's hard release of stifled breath*  
*a casualty this is the begging hour*  
*warmed with flat supernal light*  
    *you can see sound you can walk around it*  
        *you cannot keep it however the rains will come*  
        *the soft rain in the desert counting time*  
*whispering news of great joy*

she sees all this and hears it in herself  
the word and water and the girl  
reflected ghostly on the ebb and swirl  
who only knows the words for yes and yes  
she is the prey and bird the shelf  
between the water and the wind  
the crossing road of every moment's try  
to turn itself into no other thing  
within her large embrace than fullness  
the bell whose tone the river's noise obscures  
and when she looks up  
it is another world her having heard  
a word in the water  
and in the fire over the water  
a name in the mouth's occlusion  
spoken without sound  
the sycamores lean over her in lazy awe  
she has something important to do  
she will go to her cousin in the far hill  
amazing  
she will tell her everything

## LATE READING

In a novel I'm reading some guy name Marvin wins  
The Yale with a slim volume: *The Delights of Death*.

It's supposed to be

A wink to the reader

I think. I take it personally, however,  
From an otherwise satisfying read.

As though the Yale is available to the  
Naiveté, irrelevance, self-

Importance of youth.

As though under forty

Is youth. As though poetry, as we're tirelessly told,  
Makes nothing happen. (Or makes Nothing *happen*.)

Already a corpse, you wait for me on a beach  
Double-darkened. Night smothers the deeper shelf of sea

Moving and motionless.

The tarp that covers you

Weighted randomly by blown sand, barely swayed  
By the scraping of stiff wind, hardly

Rises from the dunes, hardly shows at all the knolls  
Of a body once lithe, once clumsy and treasured,

Once a living man.

I'm somewhere else, being

Scolded I think, being fired, discovered,

My con exposed. Even close friends are hostile.

In the book of my mind, on a single page where the sea  
With visible intensity moves undeterred

Inevitably

To claim you, I listen

As wind gasps in the folds of your body,

Sings to me in a strange language. But I am

Distracted by betrayals, by sharp explosions  
Of anger: I have no idea, they are saying,  
    How lazy I am,  
    How frustrating it is  
To love me. My sums don't add up. *Adios*  
Says the pay-stub. Take your money and go. Now.  
  
In the novel the delights of death signal to  
The protagonist but remain alien. They are  
    Still urgent, still bright  
    As the face in his face,  
The Younger Poet who (we sigh) finally smiles.  
But it might as well be in tongues. Exit the hero.  
  
He will not understand this. *And he must.* Thus,  
The dénouement: a hand on his shoulder. A dream  
    Forgotten as soon  
    As the effulgent light  
Demands, like the lapping sea, his attention, come  
To carry off his mystery, his pearl of great price.  
  
In another dream, I approach you. You are not  
Buried in this one, not rotting or turning to salt.  
    You are clean, white shirt,  
    Grinning, glorified. You  
Take my hand as we glide into a burnished pew.  
And then we are singing. Together. A congregation.



## WHERE I WOULD NOT GO

What I haven't learned from movies my father  
Whispers to me in code the long nights  
Sleep will not come. I have forgotten how to believe

In Safe Passage; consequently I have been listening  
To my father a good deal lately. He says  
I'm home for you and half the time I know

He's lying but some nights all it takes  
Is one good word: you say my name  
For example; I hear it and distinctly know

We are all loved and spoken for and nothing else matters.  
Clocks subtract with or without hands, wine tastes  
Like gasoline and I stare down my eyelids

Till shadows thin, tomorrow drops into its slot,  
A perfect fit, and I must have slept sometime,  
How else could I dream you.

In winter this occurs less often, but when it is  
Spring, when invisible revolvers  
In the slim trunks of Crape Myrtle cock,

Release, and slow-motion, suddenly,  
The low music of a million bees  
And all the fields are white,

I am standing in the middle of myself;  
I am a goddamn little boy again  
And cannot lose the furrowed look

Of someone waiting for a man in his car to burst  
Shouldering the hill. And you are there, silhouette  
Of no one exactly, of no body but mine.

## MY BROTHER'S GHOST

Here where I labor

    The last light widens

        Soft as a rim of footprints,

        A thumb of blood flattening,

    Fading stain, slow-motion, in the arithmetic

        Of rivers.

Below me a ruined man shivers

    Tracking the swing of his shadow.

        Lines break from limbs in every direction;

        The last five leaves hang tight to the horizon

    Still believing that the drowsy syrup means

        Life everlasting.

After so many windows,

    Long since the light thinned fluttering,

        I left him behind me,

        Fogged breath in the hollow of stairways,

    A lingering straightness of blue above

        The beautiful river.

And here where I labor, where I had not hoped,

    He finds me: an explosion of pigeons,

        A stutter of wind in trees on the water,

        A perfect crowd of clouds mirrored

    In whisky colored glass, the only heaven there is

        Not imagined, not far.

## JUST BY DECIDING IT

If you were with me, I'd be thinking  
Of a drive out to the white lake  
Even though it's raining.  
We could watch the mallards' mating dance  
And eat a hamburger, or listen  
To Vivaldi on the radio, an oboe and guitar.

Once I tried learning to play the guitar.  
You're always thinking  
I know how, but I don't. If you'd listen  
When I tell you these things . . . The lake  
Is rattled now, I imagine, by the dance  
Of lightning, flocks ascending. The reigning

Species this fall is blue teal, but when it's raining  
They disappear. Sometimes I've picked up your guitar  
As if, just by deciding it, my fingers could dance  
Over the strings. And I wouldn't be thinking  
About anything but, maybe, mist on a lake,  
And I'd step out of my body and listen.

Brent, listen:

You can hardly hear it raining  
From the banks that surround our tender lake  
Like the body of a guitar  
Around its vacant well. Thinking  
About it, not like a death, but like a dance,

We are locked arm in arm; the dance  
Depends on the distance between us. We listen  
For the counterpoint, thinking  
It's our one hope: to love rain when it's raining.  
The flood hits the roof like chords on a guitar.  
If we were together the lake

Could be all ours. No one comes to the lake  
On a day like this. No one watches ducks dance  
Or holds his breath to hear their quiet—*Listen*—  
Almost inaudible banter, like me on the guitar:  
Strumming but muted. It has stopped raining.  
If you were here, what would we be thinking?

I lie down by the lake and listen.  
Stop thinking for a minute. It isn't even raining.  
That's you in the ground dancing. That's me on the guitar.

## JUST THE FACTS

Sex captured me suddenly at thirteen:  
I woke to find my roommate in my mouth.  
It was boarding school, I admit. But still,  
Even as I struggled to oblige, there  
Was nothing of pleasure, of morning light.  
He never bothered me again or spoke

Of it. A series of chance encounters  
(I remember names: Tommy, Ronald, Jeff)  
Resembled the first. It's no great wonder

I turned somewhat shy, unavailable,  
Though I couldn't have said so then. Instead,  
I hid inside my body like a cave.

New York, 1979, was full  
Of opportunity. I passed. What if  
I hadn't haunts me now most every day.

Death began in '84 with Michael.  
I took him to the doctor one cold day.  
Persistent cough. Lesions. The usual.

He died two, three months later. *Dulce et  
Decorum est.* Then Jack and Detlief. Now,  
I close my eyes and cannot count them all.

Then, last September, Dean. Unkindest cut.  
I lay all night listening to him cough.  
Sometimes it wakes me. A dead man coughing.

What if the sky's own body were a corpse  
Spread like a tent, infecting us with light?  
I climbed out by last fall and met a man

Who gave himself to me and smiled and said,  
"Whatever you want." *Whatever I want.*  
Unfortunately, he didn't have it.

## ALL ROADS LEAD TO KANSAS

That was his answer. It was his only  
Explanation. He chose a place to die  
Where life had chosen him. No longer home—  
His elders dead, his brother distant, a

Stranger—now nowhere, no one's, he found his  
Last room: a place from which to organize.  
Details occupied him. Minutes. He did  
What he could and left the rest to Kansas.

I saw him in August. He was whiter.  
His skin had let go of its frame. His eyes  
Had grown. He was lucid, translucent, proud.  
He coughed all night a garbage bag of blood.

What is a bag of blood? What does it mean  
To see such a thing? A white garbage bag,  
Half-full, opaque, disguised as life.  
What has a man left who has tendered this thing?

It is a thing of earth turned inside out.  
The inside of a man. He can shore it,  
Pollute the green fields that bore him; and still  
It's all inside, it's all there killing him.

The morning I was there he emptied death  
Into a patch of sunflowers. These are  
Immune to the diseases of our hearts.  
Sunflowers in August so huge you'd think

The whole world was redolent, green, summer.  
He did this with love. As if emptying  
A garbage bag of tainted blood  
In a patch of Kansas was just one more

Detail, another legacy, a gift  
To the soil that grew him, to the summer.  
He should not have died there,  
A still shimmering husk, nowhere, alone.

I have not lived one day unafraid.  
And he was not afraid. I don't recall  
Much that I said that trip. We slept a lot.  
I don't remember leaving either. Well.

Eleven days later, my answering  
Machine informed me of his gain. And of  
The Kansas corn that's rich to have him home,  
His business done, his business just begun.

## ROSES

What men invented who invented the seasons  
Was a body's map as bodies stretch and fall.  
They set time's start at winter's edge to show

Coming is hard to an age and going out  
Is coming all over. So it seems right  
That I should love you and your body

My whole life. I cut roses when I was a boy  
From my grandmother's yard. It was  
Unclear to me then to leave them to their lives,

To their having opened overnight in spring.  
Little boys amazed by flowers cried long cries  
Anyway, to nights as clear as God's mind is silent.

But grandmothers take you as you come. What I know  
Is that every day the roots of me are growing into you  
Against all odds, that you are holding me in the earth.

Our bodies embark their seasons steady as weather.  
Crosswinds meet on the ridges and crowd the air;  
The sky is a glass of water. We are that good.



## AT THE WEST STREET PIERS

Something about what matters  
    Breathes in the twilight blushing  
        Everything here on the piers.

Latin boys in tanktops  
    Cycle by, winking and whistling.  
        You ignore it. You smoke like a pro.

What I love most about  
    This city is the light.  
        Not only the natural light

Vesting each tenement  
    With golden damask, unfolding  
        Pumpkin dusks like gowns,

But also the light that salmons  
    Busy hearts inside  
        Our grown-up lives into children's.

A tourist takes our picture:  
    Arms over shoulders like pals,  
        Uninjured, unashamed.

In the shot, this crumbling pier  
    Blinds like a Turner harbor,  
        Light-infused and torched

From inside with *composition*.  
    For a generous, frozen moment,  
        There is no disease invading,

No shadow in this brief  
    Caesura between day  
        And the sure, descending night.

## HEAVEN REASSIGNED

I was taught to make the Sign of the Cross  
Anywhere near a Catholic church. God  
    Lived there in a box.  
    But I found myself,  
Today, ready to bless myself passing  
The Seagram Building in a cab. It's not  
The first time either. Once, the Post Office  
On Eighth, another time the Opera.  
    I catch my hand half  
    Raised, two digits curled  
In reverence. But why? The city sends  
So many blessings like fly balls—Catch them  
And you'll know why you're here. I do, anyhow.  
Last night I dreamed a poem called "Heather,"  
    And though none of its  
    Hammered strophes survived  
Awakening, it's a sonnet, *each line*  
*a Station of the Cross*. Imagine this:  
Fields; Indian summer; field after field.  
We are running fast, barely touching ground.  
    Late light tips each blossom  
    Waist-high, bloody.  
We are young, boys in fact, flying through fields  
Of heather. Now, look up: the city's arms  
Embrace us—only Central Park, it's not  
Some cave in Bethlehem, or drama set on  
    A cloud-gilt hill. Lamps,  
    Not the mind of God.  
When we were little "Mind me" meant "Obey."  
Thus, *mind* has its threats as well as rewards.

Now, its rather unnerving tendency  
To hallow rings carillons of distrust.  
    The world's reredos,  
    Muscular skyscape,  
Manhattan as window to—what—*telos*?  
I had not thought to alter till today.

What I remember from the dream is this:  
One breath of heather saved from a whole field,  
    Proffered, a crisp page.  
    The walls around us  
Off-white: the room in Fra Angelico's  
*Annunciation*, arches barely glyphed.

You bear it and smile: an Angel with news.  
Good news, bad news, then, too good to be true.  
    I thought it about  
    Me. How typical.  
I cannot hold you. I cannot be held.  
What's left must suffice. And we never die.

## WHAT COMES THROUGH HEARING

Afternoon spent listening to Bach's cello suites  
Till the daze overtook us  
And we went wandering the haunted streets  
Miming the "last fulfillment of love,"  
Indecent, but stately,  
Leaving the bodies behind  
As is so often, lately,  
The case with us.  
And something silver melted in the mind,  
And something fluted free of my tongue,  
Something both like and unlike words,  
That gathered tightly and hovered above,  
Quick, honeyed sounds like hummingbirds,  
And cried their little cries,  
And dusted my astonished eyes  
With light not seen, but sung.  
My dear, uncanny friend, it was then,  
And only then (but what can I say?  
I feel as though  
The only one left who didn't know  
Or notice something) I understood the face  
That woke me, your red, red flower,  
The sound of morning singing as it rose.  
Because, for everybody there's an hour  
Especially his own, a welcoming. God knows  
We live for it, and after, we live away,  
In music as it drifts through space,  
Carved in the palm of the cellist's hand  
As he finesses through the sarabande,  
Which meant something else to someone long ago,  
But to us—and I'm so grateful you are here—  
That we are loved, if one by the other,  
And someone's our father, someone our mother,  
And there will be no pain or grief or fear  
In our bodies floating down the beautiful river  
For the next five minutes, and, perhaps, forever.

## THE DEAD

They are so generous. They wait  
Till the streets have gone quiet enough to sleep.  
They show us around their new countries.  
They show us what we wish for most

Is just there on a table. See how the slanted light  
Opens the shadows of your outstretched arm?  
The Cézanne pears that oddly decline to fall?  
A bowl of peachcream roses? And where did *they* come from?

But with the dead explanations are beside the point.  
Why not a bowl of roses, Miss Inez,  
A cup of berry wine, a fresh white shirt? No polyester blends  
In heaven. Just 501's, 7 oz. Cokes and breezy abundance.

Yesterday I saw how they carry you.  
I stood on a sheer cliff, staring over:  
A body covered with tarp on the broken shore,  
And I knew it was you. The wind stuttered the tarp.

It was torn and green, held down by four stones.  
Your hillocks trembled, your furrows stirred  
Until you sank, and the sea was flat,  
And no wave tore, and no wind rattled.

Once you were a rag doll in a bathtub of fire.  
Once you called me long distance— Imagine!—You  
Reversed the charges. *Si prega, questi posti*  
*Sono riservati per i mutilati di guerra o lavoro.*

This on the *autobus* printed where you sat.  
You lessened as it moved away. I watched  
Your white hand waving, barely gripping  
An invisible lightbulb, just like the Queen. Farewell, ghost.

I loved you while you lasted and I didn't even know, here  
In the day's gravity. And I'm sure the reason you give me  
Yourself in night cities and churches and houses burning  
Is that you are and ever shall be. My mirror. My vocation.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

STEPHEN MCLEOD GREW UP IN DALLAS, TEXAS AND HAS LIVED IN New York City since 1987. He was educated at Southern Methodist University, Columbia University, and the Fordham University School of Law. In 2000, his manuscript was one of four finalists for the Academy of American Poets' Walt Whitman Award, and one of seven finalists for Fordham University's Poetry Out Loud Award. Mr. McLeod currently lives in Brooklyn and works as an appellate attorney for the Brooklyn District Attorney.

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May Swenson lived most of her adult life in New York City, the center of poetry writing and publishing in her day. But she is buried in Logan, Utah, her birthplace and hometown.